

is what Senator ERNST articulated so well last night. And if the President is willing to put the veto threats away and the designed-to-fail talking points aside, we can still cooperate to get some smart things done for the people we represent.

RECOGNITION OF THE ACTING MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant Democratic leader is recognized.

PROGRESS FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, last night the President talked about the economy and the progress we have made. The United States grew 2.6 percent last year, and in the third quarter alone our economy grew by 5 percent. Nearly 3 million jobs were created—the best year for the U.S. labor market since the height of the economic boom under President Bill Clinton. Lower gasoline prices are providing relief to many families and consumer confidence is up. The deficit has been cut in half.

Yet we know that while the economy is growing and unemployment is declining, sadly, much of the benefit is going to those at the very top of the ladder. The top 1 percent of American wage earners saw 49 percent of the decline in incomes during the recession, but they have seen 95 percent of the income gained since the recovery started. Let me repeat that. The top 1 percent of wage earners have seen 95 percent of the gains since our economy has recovered.

The gap between wages for low-income and middle-income families and those at the top is staggering. Forty-seven people in America own more than 160 million Americans combined. That has to change.

This isn't just a Democratic observation. Even Republicans have publicly agreed with us that working families are falling behind. Let me quote a few. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a potential candidate for President, said: "Here's reality: If you're fortunate enough to count yourself among the privileged, much of the rest of the Nation is drowning." Jeb Bush said that.

Mitt Romney, a former Republican candidate for President and perhaps a Republican candidate for President again—here is what he said last week as he has rekindled his dream for the Presidency: "... the rich have gotten richer, income inequality has gotten worse, and there are more people in poverty than ever before."

Even Speaker JOHN BOEHNER said this in an interview:

The top third of America are doing pretty good. The bottom two-thirds are really being squeezed.

So how do we address these challenges? Our parties look at it differently.

The Republican majority in this Chamber had to pick the first bill they would bring to the floor of the Senate once they reached the majority. There were a lot of initiatives they could have considered. We know what they chose—the Keystone XL Pipeline—a pipeline owned by a Canadian company. That is the No. 1 priority of the Republicans in the Senate, bar none. When they wanted to respond to President Obama's State of the Union Address with Senator ERNST of Iowa, they focused on the Keystone XL Pipeline. What a limited vision of the future—one pipeline.

Then we took two votes yesterday on this pipeline, and it started to become clear what this pipeline is all about. It is moving Canadian tar sands from Canada, through the United States, and to a refinery in Texas. We learned yesterday the Republicans will not even support the proposition that the refined oil products coming out of this refinery will help America.

We had a simple amendment Senator MARKEY of Massachusetts offered which said that at the end of the pipeline, the refinery's oil products will be sold in America. The Republicans defeated that amendment. So all this argument about how this oil out of this pipeline is going to help our economy in the future? Nope, don't expect it to happen. Yesterday's overwhelming Republican vote made it clear.

There was a second part that was considered yesterday. This bill—the No. 1 priority of the Senate Republican majority—is going to build a pipeline, that is for sure. We said, good, if it is going to be built, use American steel in building the pipeline. That is not an outrageous suggestion. If this is such a priority for the Republicans, wouldn't they want to put Americans to work to make the steel to build the pipeline? We offered that as an amendment yesterday. Senator FRANKEN offered that amendment and the Republicans rejected it. The Republicans rejected the premise that the steel that goes into the most important pipeline in the history of America, from their point of view, should actually come from America. That is the second amendment we considered.

This special interest project, the Keystone XL Canadian-owned pipeline, is going to continue to be the No. 1 dominant issue in the Senate for days to come.

Republicans plan to do everything they can to help build a pipeline, but they want to deny millions of Americans access to health care. That is what the House Republicans have come up with. They want to come up with a plan that will literally take away the coverage of health care from Americans. Is there anyone in this country who thinks that is the right thing for our future? We are trying to reduce the number of uninsured. The Republican changes to the Affordable Care Act would increase the number of uninsured and increase the number of

Americans dependent on government-sponsored health care. It doesn't sound like a Republican idea to me, but it is. That is what is coming from the House of Representatives.

There are pretty clear differences in how we help working families. For the Senate Republicans, it is to build a Canadian pipeline. Don't use American steel, don't keep the oil in America, but build this pipeline—No. 1 priority. The House Republicans take away health insurance coverage for hundreds of thousands of Americans at a time when we know that leaves people in a precarious position.

Here is what the President said last night: We want to make certain we focus on projects and programs and new ideas that can leave our children a better world and our grandchildren as well. Do we want an economy where everyone has an opportunity to climb that economic ladder or do we want a world where those who are born into lives of luxury set the rules and always come out ahead? Do we want an economy that rewards those who work hard and play by the rules or an economy where corporations rig the game so it is tails you lose, heads I win?

We know that an economy with a strong middle class is key to growing America. Yet it is becoming harder and harder for families to even reach the middle class. Working families aren't looking for a handout—not in my State. They just want a chance for a better life for their kids.

There is a way we can do this. It is called the earned-income tax credit. This is an idea supported by Republican Presidents in the past. Historically both parties have supported it. The earned-income tax credit is designed to encourage work by providing a tax credit to working families.

The President's proposal, similar to one that SHERROD BROWN and I have introduced, would expand the credit to help the only group that our Tax Code pushes into poverty: childless workers. What a difference this would make for millions of working families, the difference between paying a heating bill or putting it off, the difference between getting a prescription filled or waiting. A small refundable tax credit for these workers can make a bigger difference than many U.S. Senators would ever realize.

The President also proposed making 2 years of community college free for responsible students and giving motivated students a path to a solid educational foundation without debt. This is not a Democratic idea. The President acknowledged last night that this idea came from a Republican Governor in Tennessee. I might add that a Democratic mayor, Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, has a similar program, but the President went to Tennessee to acknowledge that the Republican legislature and the Republican Governor had come up with a good idea. So to argue this is somehow a partisan idea, it sure isn't in Tennessee. If it is partisan, it is a Republican partisan idea.